

LIMBU ETHNICITY AT CROSSROADS *

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Introduction

The Limbus are variously known as 'Chongs', 'Changs' 'Tsongs', 'Tsangs', and 'Yakthungbas'. Generally, they use the title 'Subba' but many also use their ethnic name 'Limbu' as also clan names like Songpangbe, Phago, Luksom, and Samba as their title. Racially, they belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group and linguistically to the Tibero-Burman family though purity in either case is not to be expected. They are also said to be one of the Kirata groups.

Their exact origin is not known. Most writing on them mention three sources of their origin: one, those belonging to the *Lhasa* ~~Lapaha~~ gotra, who may eat beef, as migrated from the Tsang province of Tibet; two, the Kashi gotra Limbus as migrated from Benares; and three, the Phedaps or those who had emerged from the mother earth. The first source is disputed by R. Keith Sprigg on phonetic grounds. He says that had the term 'Chong' been of Tibetan origin it would never be pronounced as 'Choong' as it is done always. The second source is disputed by scholars like Northey and Morris on the ground that such an origin must have been claimed by them in the universal desire to have a higher social status in the society. But they were always outside the Varna order and only few of them ever recognized this order. Even now they are least bothered about their caste status accorded by the Bahun neighbours. There are however two points which indicate that they could have come from Benares: One, their gotra names are primarily and predominantly based on place names and only secondarily on the names of some exemplary ancestors.

Two, it is a historical fact that the Kiratas once inhabited the Gangetic plains also. The very name 'Ganga' is supposed to have been of Kirata origin. This should not however be taken without context: the present Limbus may have historically no connection except as Kiratas.

The anthropometric variations in them, however, suggest that they have intermixed with many other racial groups before they migrated to their present habitats.

Spatial Distribution

There are ample historical records to show that the Limbus occupied the easternmost part of Nepal, western Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills at least from the seventeenth century onwards. Even now they are chiefly concentrated in these areas but in smaller numbers they are also found in many other parts of India and South-East Asia. Their exact population in India cannot be ascertained but in Nepal the 1981 Census returned about 1.5 lakhs. On the basis of a rough estimate of their population in Darjeeling district and Sikkim together their number comes to about 0.7 lakhs in 1981. Thus the total Limbu population in the world may be about 2.5 lakhs.

The Kirata Nationality

It is difficult to say to what extent did the Limbus form an active part of the Kirata nationality that disintegrated gradually after the Aryans gained control over them. The rise and fall of the Kirata nationality needs an intensive historical research before reaching at any conclusions.

From 1925 onwards one observes a seemingly important phase in the history of the Kirata nationalism. It was in this year that the Sarva Kirant Chumlung or All Kirata Association was established. But the participation of the Limbus of Nepal and the Rais, and the Yakhas of even Darjeeling and Sikkim being negligible, this Association remained largely a Limbu association. This fact was unchanged till its 52nd Convention held in 1977 in Kalimpong.

There could be several reasons for this. For instance, it could be due to the fact that it was the Limbus who had initiated this move. Further, the Rais and the Yakhas had rich variation of dialects within them but had no script of their own while the Limbus had a well developed script. But most importantly perhaps, there was no common language between them except 'Nepali'. Yet an important factor was

their geographical distribution : the Rais were mostly confined to the Sadar and Kurseong sub-divisions of Darjeeling while the Limbus were concentrated mostly in Western Sikkim and Kalimpong. The Yakhas were in small number everywhere and they were usually identified either with the Limbus or the Rais.

For these reasons and others it is doubtful if the Kirata nationality was ever an emotional nationality. It could very much have been a political nationality as India is today. Despite cultural similarities between the Kirata groups, the linguistic and geographical barriers must have played an even more significant role in inhibiting the growth of the Kirata nationality before and now.

The Limbu Nationality

One of the probable reasons why the Limbus always exhibited a strong sense of nationalism is their memory of Limbuana or the Limbu kingdom that existed in eastern Nepal until 1764. Their kingdom fell into the hands of the Gorkha king, Prithivinarayan Shah, as did the Newar, Rai and Sunuwar kingdoms west of Limbuana. This happened though they were never conquered by the Gorkha king as it was the case with other kingdoms mentioned above.

All the Limbus of western Sikkim and Darjeeling were not a part of the Limbu kingdom but some of their brethren had certainly migrated from Limbuana during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even otherwise, the Limbus of Darjeeling and Sikkim did always have socio-cultural linkages with their counterparts in eastern Nepal. This was facilitated by the geographical contiguity of these areas and compelled by the orientation of the ruling Bhutias in Sikkim towards the north. This kept the Limbu nationality alive and even sometimes made it more overpowering than the Kirata nationality. The Limbu nationality has, in fact, regained its valour recently under the banner of Limbuan Mukti Morcha in eastern Nepal.

Lhomentsongsum

The Limbus were a part of another ethnic association formed in coalition with the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim during the second half of the seventeenth century. This association was called *Lhomentsongsum* or the trio of Lhopas or Bhutias, Monpas or Lepchas, and Tsongs or Limbus. About its origin, it is written :

To win the confidence of the Kirati tribes, he (Phuntsog Namgyal) invited all the tribal chiefs to a meeting where he proclaimed that the Sikkim Bhotias (the victorious Lhopas) the Membas or the Monpas (the Lepchas) and the Tsongs (the Yak Thambas or the Limbus) were of one family. The king (a Lhopa) should be considered the father, the Lepchas (the Membas or Monpa) the mother, and the Limbus (the Tsongs) the sons of the same family, forming a council called 'Lhomentsong' (Sinha 1975: 14).

The need to win over the then numerically dominant Limbus and the Lepchas was very much there for the very viability of Sikkim as a country. The ruling Bhutias in particular always felt threatened by the non-Bhutia communities of Sikkim. The hasty conversion of many Limbus and Lepchas into Buddhism could not give them much assurance about their loyalty to the palace. Even planned intermarriages were not much forthcoming. And the Mangars in particular did never give up their resistance to the Bhutia hegemony.

However, despite state patronage and state interest in this Association until about fifteen years back, this Association could never really pick up its gears. There could be several reasons for this. In the first place, the Limbus of Sikkim were actively involved in the All Kirata Association which did not take members from the Lepchas and Bhutias. Secondly, the inter-marriages between the Limbus and the Bhutias were not as frequent as those between the Lepchas and the Bhutias. Thirdly, the dress of the Limbus was akin to that of other 'Nepalis' while the Lepchas and Bhutias had only marginal differences in dress. Finally, while the Lepchas were wholly converted into Buddhism by the end of the eighteenth century, the conversion of the Limbus into Buddhism had only a marginal success. Like the Lepchas but unlike the Bhutias, the Limbus were nature worshippers, sacrificed fowls and goats, and had their own priests called *Phedangma*. And unlike the Lepcha-Bhutias, they celebrated the 'Nepali' festivals like *dashain*, *tihar*, and *maghe sankranti*. Even spatially, they were concentrated in the west of Sikkim while the Lepcha-Bhutias lived closely or intermixed in the other parts of Sikkim.

The *Lhomentsongsum* has existed till date but almost as an underground organization, particularly after the Sikkim Sangram

Parishad came in power about 11 years back. It is doubtful if it will wake up again and regain its strength even if it does.

The Gorkha Identity

While the Limbu Nationalism has always been trans-national, the Kirata nationality as it emerged in the twentieth century could not engulf the Kiratas of eastern Nepal, not even all Limbus, and remained an exclusive association of the Limbus in Darjeeling and Sikkim. The *Lhomentsongsum* also ~~could~~ ^{could} not cross the Teesta and Rangit rivers and remained confined to Sikkim. And the Gorkha identity actually flourished only in the Darjeeling hills and Dooars area of Jalpaiguri district. But the Kirata nationalism in Darjeeling was almost aborted by the Gorkha nationalism as the former had many structural weaknesses and the latter had a wider base and deeper appeal there.

One of the significant reasons why the Gorkha nationalism has always distracted many Limbus from the Limbu nationalism is the fact that they were recruited in large numbers in Gorkha regiments in India and abroad. The retired army personnels not only formed an elite class within themselves but also provided leadership to 'Gorkha' in general due to their widened contact and interaction with many non-Limbu people during their military service. Most of them had already abandoned what they considered as the 'narrow Limbu nationalism'. This applied very much to the Limbus of Nepal as well.

Apart from the appeal of the Gorkha nationalism, the communist ideology had drawn many of them away from their ethnic barracks, in Nepal as well as in India. If the Gorkha nationalism was overtaking the Limbu nationalism in most parts of Darjeeling recently it was the communist ideology which was pulling them away from it in many tea gardens there. Thus, when the Gorkhaland Movement was in its climax many of them burnt down the houses of their own people, even killed them at places, putting a sudden stop to the possibility of having a strong Limbu nationalism there for quite some time from now.

Conclusion

It is doubtful if the Limbus will remain satisfied with the Gorkha

nationalism for long. There are chances that they may fall back upon the Kirata nationalism but *Lhomentsongsum* does not seem to have much chance of regaining its position of mid-seventeenth century. But unless the strategies are changed completely or a charismatic leader is born the chances of their success appear rather slim no matter what permutation combination they choose. In any case the affective tie that exists in them has to be strengthened and supported by issues which are not only ethnic but also economic. Until then, the Limbus will have to keep wavering about.

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